

Commencement Address  
Summer Quarter  
September 3, 1992  
Frank H.T. Rhodes, Pres.  
Cornell University

President Gee, Provost Huber, members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished members of the faculty and administration and staff, but most of all those of you who are graduating here at the end of summer quarter 1992, parents, families, guests and friends.

This is a great day and it is a great day for my wife and I to be back on this wonderful campus of this great university. As I listen to President Gee commiserating with some of you who have spent rather longer than usual attaining your degrees today, I offer one word of consolation. I entered as a freshman in 1965 and it's taken me even longer than some of you to graduate today. The generosity you have shown in welcoming someone with Michigan roots is extraordinary. And so as someone who has been long time Wolverine I'm aware that this arena is sometimes used for other purposes.

I want to tell you one of those fragments of information that is useful at least in Cornell athletic circles. And that is that though it's some decades since we played one another in football the Cornell record against Ohio State is 2-0. But I have to tell you we are not looking to extend that winning streak any time soon. The last game was played over 50 years ago.

But not even contests in this arena between the Wolverines and the Buckeyes match the importance or the exuberance or the lasting joy of today's graduation.

What is it makes graduation such a special day? It's not the ceremony itself because, impressive as that is, it is relatively predictable. It is certainly not the speaker because it's traditional for the speaker to give you advice and it's equally traditional for you to ignore it. There are after all only two kinds of commencement addresses, the long one and the short one.

The long one is typified by the commencement speaker at Yale some years ago who took the word "Yale" and expounded on each of the four letters. Y is for youth, he declared, and the exuberance and the energy and the zeal that you represent. And he expounded on that for 30 minutes. A is for alumni which you will shortly become and for the bond that always exists between you and the alma mater. Another 30 minutes on that. An L is for loyalty that indissoluble characteristic between the sons and daughters of Yale and the alma mater.



And another 30 minutes. And E is for excellence, the hallmark of everything we do at this ancient institution. And 35 minutes on that one. And a weary parent, toward the end of this, was heard to lean over and whisper to his neighbor, "Thank heavens this isn't the Massachusetts Institute of Technology."

There is a second kind of commencement address, the short one. Bob Hope, giving a commencement address, once addressed the class as follows, "For those of you who are about to leave this university and enter the real world, I have one word of advice. Here it is---don't go." And he sat down.

But go you must and that's what today's ceremony is all about. After all you've been lectured to death during your years here. And if you get to the end of the runway and you still don't know how to fly, then you're in trouble. But the very fact that you're here today means that you do know how to fly. That means that it's not for the ceremony itself and certainly not for the speaker that commencement today is so significant. There are other reasons. And the first is simply to celebrate with you the substantial achievement today's graduation represents.

This is one of the nation's great universities, a flagship institution, and I'm happy to salute our sister land-grant university, from Cornell to The Ohio State University. We have the closest links and a shared mission which is our privilege to pursue together. You have a cluster of departments that are literally among the best in the country. You have a faculty of extraordinary ability and I know that well from my time here. And no one represents and embodies the excellence of that faculty better than my host here today, emeritus professor Walter Sweet, and my old friend, emeritus professor Robert Bates. Two people whose scholarly distinction, whose published writings, whose professional commitment in professional circles and to industry more broadly, and whose love and institution to the Ohio State University reflected in faithful teaching and mentoring to generations of students, represents all that's best amongst the faculty of Ohio State.

And it's their high expectations that you meet today. Joe Louis, the great former heavyweight champion, once declared, "If I had to do it all over again, I wouldn't have the strength to do it." But you have done it and you've had the strength and it's those high standards of professional achievement that we celebrate together with you and congratulate you on today.

There's a second thing that makes today significant. And that's the love and support and the nurture of those who brought you to this day, not just the faculty but also the members of your family and your friends. No one is closer to



you graduating today that the parents and the spouses and the children and the immediate family who have nourished you on this long march. Their expectations are fulfilled today.

I like the story of the lawyer who had no children of his own and who, in a sense, built his expectations on the little boy who lived next door, always urging him to reach out, to stretch, to have high hopes. And one day on his way to the train station, he was delighted to see the little boy nailing up a sign that said, "Dog for sale. \$50,000." "That's the way my lad," the lawyer said, "that's the way to think big." And as he came home that night from a long day at the office he noticed that the sign had disappeared. And he saw the young lad and said, "Did you sell the dog?" "Well, not exactly," said the young boy, "but I traded him in for two \$25,000 cats."

The high expectations that members of your family have today are fulfilled. And I wonder if, on behalf of all those who graduate today, parents, spouses, children, close family members of today's graduates would stand up so that we can tell you particularly today, not only how grateful we are but how much we admire and respect and love those of you who have supported us on the long march. Wont you please stand that we may salute you. Thank you. Please be seated.

But there is a third reason today is significant and that is that it is a time to pause and put graduation itself into a wider context. And the years that you have spent at Ohio State must be reckoned by all as the most remarkable during the past century. There are those who view this as the dawning of a golden age, when advances in science and technology bring us the bravest of new worlds, whether in agriculture or health care, giving us new crops and new freedom from disease and suffering. There are those who look with delight at the end of the cold war and the opportunities that represents to provide a fertile soil for the flowering of new democracies. And there are those who see the Earth Summit in Rio recently completed as a new movement forward for the human race, giving a shared sense of responsibility for our planet and a chance for improvement and change that rises above national interests and personal selfishness.

But against that there's a strong counterpoint. There are those who point to the economic slowdown, resistant so far to all the corrective actions that we've sought to apply to it. There are those who look at our technology and see, not success, but plundering the planet on which we live, of satellites that refuse to go into orbit, of tethers that wont unwind. And a house appropriations committee supporting the venture that changes its mind midway through the various projects. And in contrast to the success of the Earth Summit they look at Saddam Hussein and his despoiling and vandalizing the nation of Kuwait.



Even our society appears to some to be bankrupt and our humanity to be called into question. It is not democracy but it is ethnic hatred that have taken the place of communism in Bosnia and Herscovina. Ethnic cleansing in those areas represents a new level of barbarism that many of us supposed had disappeared with the disappearance of Hitler and Stalin. And even closer at home the judicial tragedy of Los Angeles and the tragedies of violence in our people that followed it make us wonder if this nation truly is one or if alienation has roots which go deeply into our society at large. Is it a dawning of a new golden age or is it the beginning of a dark night. Is hopelessness something that is confined to Sarejevo or is hopelessness something that stalks our own cities along with despair.

But it's not just those who live in L.A. and not just those who live in Sarajevo who have a sense of hopelessness and who need meaning and purpose to pursue lives that are full. Just before our own graduation at Cornell this year, a student columnist in the daily student newspaper, somebody who was about to graduate, wrote these words. "Cornell still manages to deliver the goods. But it's children leave without a sense of purpose to guide them through a senseless world." It's children leave without a sense of purpose to guide them through a senseless world. But surely he was right for without a sense of purpose life does become increasingly meaningless. You remember the artist Francis Bacon, who died earlier this year at the age of 82, who declared quite simply, "I am an optimist--but about nothing. We live and die and that's it." That kind of emptiness guarantees a life of frustration.

But the paradox, not just for Bacon, but for those of you graduating today, is that neither a rising economy nor a job for every graduate, not the wonders of technology or the promise of personal success, not your families, not the curriculum, not this great university can hand you an instant sense of purpose, a one size, fits all, ready made sense of direction that will guide you in the years ahead. That is yours and yours alone and without it graduation today is empty. There is even in the welter of courses offered by the Ohio State University, not, as far as I know, a course in Life 101 which answers the simple, basic questions of life with parity and precision, preferably on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 11 o'clock in the morning. There is no difference in the end between the learned individual who is empty and the unlearned individual who is adrift.

John Gardner was right. Life is not a mountain that has a summit. It is not a riddle that has a single answer. It is, instead, a continuous unfolding, a continuous process of self discovery.

But if you do not leave this arena today with a sense of purpose ready-made you do leave it with something with



something more precious. You leave it, first of all, with a remarkable range of skills that will enable you to give professional leadership and service far into the next century.

And if you do not leave it with a second-hand answer to life's most basic questions, you leave it instead with a first-hand encounter with the best that has been known, the best that has been thought, the best that has been created, the best that has been achieved. Ohio State sets you on your journey not with an answer but with a question. And the question today is "What will you do with this diploma that you are shortly to receive?" After all we cannot choose to be born in a particular country, to be born at a particular time, to be born to particular parents, not even whether to graduate in a time of economic boom or bust. But in spite of that we can choose how to use these diplomas in the years ahead. That is a very private choice but it has very public results.

Because your world, classes of 1992, your world is neither prison or chaos. It is open. Progress is possible, though it is sometimes slow. And you can help to achieve it. Justice is attainable though it is often imperfect, and you can and must help to promote it. Suffering can be overcome though never fully. And you can and must help to relieve it.

Fifty years from now, in the year 2042, you will, I hope, gather again on the campus here in Columbus for your 50th reunion. There will, no doubt, be many changes both in you and on the campus. But some things, I hope, will not be changed. You will come back to marvel at the way in which things survive change around us. And some things that are precious today, Mirror Lake and the Oval, grand places on the campus like the Wexner Center and more homely things like the pony barns, will still be places and have associations that you will cherish.

You will all no doubt be successful as you come back for that 50th reunion. But I hope that success will not be bought of the cost of narrowing horizons and increasing personal estrangement. I hope that you will have followed another road, harnessing the great professional skills that we celebrate today, to great and noble and lofty purposes, squandering yourselves for things that are good and true and worthy. Because one thing I know, only that kind of life, of risk and ambiguity and commitment, will make you happy. The other way lies emptiness.

And so whether today, 1992, this remarkable year, is the dawn of a new golden era or the entry into a new dark night, not just for our nation but for the world at large, depends to a great degree on the use you are going to make of these new diplomas. You have been given the tools by this great university for the journey that's about to begin. You have been given the skills and been given the insight to perform public service in a host of different spheres. But the road you choose and how you will use these new minted skills, that choice is yours and yours alone. Members of the classes of 1992, I hope you will choose well.

Good success. Godspeed.